



"A Singing Blackbird", and Georgian Cinema

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co-directors rather than assistants, or is it simply a question of terminology?

No, I prefer it because there are a lot of things I don't know. I knew nothing about France in 1960, so the co-director was Morin. *Cocorico!* is a work of collective improvisation: Damouré, Lam and myself. Each of us had his role, like in a jam session.

Speaking about music, can a musical rhythm dictate the rhythm of a scene?

No, never, except if the music is part of the scene. I use very little background music, except in *La Chasse au Lion à l'Arc*: there is some guitar music which creates a war atmosphere and which is repeated in *Babatu*. It creates an epic dimension. It's an indication of something else, then. But I detest film music—it's like pretty

images, enveloping something in a pretty wrapping, as if it were a Christmas present: cheap but with a magnificent wrapping. It's what's inside that counts. This is the role of music in cinema, except in the Western. There, it gives an epic dimension—it indicates falseness. Everything that is announced as false is accompanied by music.

Are you optimistic?

Of course, and you?

Sometimes.

Why sometimes? And the rest of the time?

There are doubts.

Doubts are optimism. There is nothing more pessimistic than a puritan. The moment you have doubts, everything is possible.

DON WILLIS

A Singing Blackbird, and Georgian Cinema

In the last few years films from the Soviet Republic of Georgia have been getting some overdue recognition at film festivals and retrospectives around the world, but they still qualify as one of the better-kept secrets of international cinema. The relatively well known *Pirosmani* (1971), by Giorgi Shengelaya, is only one of a number of sharply stylized, idiosyncratic Georgian films currently making the archive circuit, in a package put together by National Film Theatre of London programmer John Gillett.

No one film is like another. *Molba*, or *The Prayer*, (Abuladze, 1968), is a genre of one, an epic "poem" of apocalyptic brutality and horror ironically framed by a fervent profession of absolute faith in God. Alternately static in its recitations ("I'm sick to death of tombs" is one of the less fortunate speeches) and awesome in its Revelations-like imagery, *Molba* is guaranteed to overwhelm one way or another. *My Grandmother*

(Mikaberidze, 1929) is a savage, Vigo-esque satire of Russian bureaucracy employing fantasy, dreams, stop-motion animation, double and triple exposure, slow motion, etc. Sample nightmare image: a lazy bureaucrat speared through the chest by a giant fountain pen. The film isn't just an argument for diligence. It goes way beyond plain argument into outrage, malicious glee, and comic horror: in one sequence a woman and her little daughter Charleston giddily in delight at their breadwinner's supposed success at the office ("I've such a good husband!"), oblivious of the just-fired husband hanging rather foolishly from a noose on the chandelier. (He proves inept at suicide too.) This astonishing silent comedy should be at least a page in future film history books. You wonder why it isn't in the current ones.

Almost conventional—by Georgian standards—but also quite likeable and full of visual verve

are *Ballad of Khevsur* (Managadze, 1965), *The First Swallow* (Mchelidze, 1975) and *Romancers*, or *The Eccentrics* (Eldar Shengelaya, Georgi's brother; 1974). Shengelaya's central conceit—a flying machine that soars on (figurative) wings of love—is unsubtle, but charming, and his fantasy has a lovely visual and thematic design although, as in his earlier, less interesting *An Unusual Exhibition* (1968), his sense of character remains earthbound. In such heady company, mediocrity is almost reassuring, and is well represented by *Salt for Svanetia* and *The Letter That Was Never Sent* (Kalatazov, 1930 and 1959, respectively). The camerawork in the latter is all clichés: hand-held shots for fast action, fast tracks to suggest exhilaration, off-angle shots for everything—and the story is a Siberian low-adventure drama that alternates between a foolish sort of national optimism and easy challenges to that optimism.

Perhaps the most gifted Georgian film-maker of all is Otar Ioseliani, director of *When the Leaves Fall* (1967), *A Singing Blackbird or Day by Day* (1971) and *Pastoral* (1975). *When the Leaves Fall* is about an agreeable young man who becomes a foreman in a wine factory, and who, despite pressure to get the wine bottled quickly (even if it's inferior), refuses to yield. He dumps gelatine into vat 49 to bring it up to standard, even though that means a two-week settling period will be necessary and the factory will fall behind in its program. Before, when the factory workers went out and ordered wine together at a restaurant, they had to inspect it to see if it was their own, then check the date it was bottled. ("It's ours." "March 25." Abrupt exit, en masse.) They're about to bend again before authority, and have even begun pumping ("Tell your friends not to buy August 12"), when Niko halts production.

The subject of *When the Leaves Fall* is authority and resistance, whether the voice of authority is a corrupt boss, a nagging mother, a weak friend or a girl's omnipresent thug of an ex-boy friend. Niko's friend and co-worker tells him, "You must learn how to get along in life," and even the boss's little boy advises him, "Your tactics are wrong." In this film's world *everyone* knows better than you do. Niko's friend does all the proper, smart things. When they apply for work at the factory he says he doesn't drink or play cards, while Niko

admits to a little of both, not knowing that, to the boss, you don't admit to a life apart from work. His friend, very properly, tips a cigarette butt that lands on the rim of an ashtray into the tray; Niko tosses his cigarette on the sidewalk. (Inevitably, a passerby orders him, absurdly, "Pick up that butt.")

The film's cleverly worked out etiquette for cigarettes instructs you to give the boss a light, but not, my God, a stranger who happens to be sitting at your table intruding on your tête-à-tête. Niko just doesn't know what's in his own best interests. He lets the stranger sit down, lights his cigarette and even, apparently, lets him get away with his order of coffee, while the girl waits, not quite believing such idiot generosity, or politeness.

Niko is called, to his face, "green," "stubborn," and, facetiously, by the girl, Marina, a "man of principle." The terms are intended to encourage passivity and discourage initiative. But he resists, and his boss, unaccountably, praises his unauthorized addition of the gelatine. Even the boss, it seems, must yield before a higher authority: the accomplished fact. The film, with its sense of life-as-obstacle and people as impossible, is very good, if occasionally rather cryptic in its imagery and odd sound-track pyrotechnics. Its surface charm is somewhat deceptive—the world of love and work it describes is almost chilling in its systematic isolating of the hero, who, finding he can trust no one, becomes an unreasonable man in an equally unreasonable world.

The hero of Ioseliani's exquisitely imagined *A Singing Blackbird*, confronted with life's dismaying variety, tries to sample a little of everything on the table and, for a while, succeeds. The rare work of art which, like this one, suggests that it's possible for life to be too much of a good thing requires an artist who can see all that the world offers, and at the same time understand the provisions of that offer. In the novella "A Faint Heart," for instance, Dostoevsky has his hero Vasya, surfeited with happiness, finally lose his mind.

Ioseliani's Giha, an orchestra tympanist, has his crowded daily timetable calculated "down to the second." If he can't be everywhere at once,

GEORGIAN CINEMA

he at least tries to be, putting in a brief, precisely timed nightly appearance at the concert hall, taking a friend to the doctor, playing the piano for his aunt's birthday party at home, joining the chorus at a reunion afterwards. In a way the world was made for him. Superficially, he harmonizes with everyone and everything in it. The more people he meets, the more friends he makes. He's instantly engaging, a good—a great—natural mixer, a nimble water skidder on life's surface.

But in another way the world isn't his at all. If he fits in everywhere, it's by a hair, as his mad last-minute dashes into the orchestra pit suggest. Giha, in developing his social and musical gifts extensively rather than intensively, arguably exploits them to the fullest. That is, he's talented, but perhaps in too many directions. "Dilettante" derives from the Latin for "to delight," and Giha is an embodiment of the word. Is he right to worry that his life is a "flat zero?" Do the splinters of friendship that compose his life signal "happiness" or "emptiness" or something of each? *A Singing Blackbird* is neither a mindless celebration of a free spirit nor a lecture on the consequences of irresponsibility. If Giha pleases everyone, he also slights everyone. The more friends he makes, the less time he has for each of them. The moment's pause of recollection by his friend the watchmaker at the end is the measure of how much he'll be missed by everyone—a little.

Intimations of danger punctuate the film: a large flower pot that crashes just behind Giha at one point, a building demolition, sidewalk explosions that turn out to be part of a movie being shot. These peripheral jolts are like subliminal signals, signs that a sense of order is somehow being violated. Looking at the scene through the camera viewfinder, Giha asks the film crew's cameraman, "What are those lines for?" as we see, in a subjective insert, the viewfinder cross hairs (and, behind them, the actors). The odd link between potential danger and "lines" turns out to be a crucial one: at the end Giha, jaywalking across a busy, four-lane street, fends off a bus in the first lane, only to be hit (and apparently killed) by a car hidden behind the bus in the second. A crowd forms and disperses. Ending the sequence is a high-angle long shot of the



WHEN THE LEAVES FALL

empty street emphasizing the "operative" element: the network of broken and solid white lines. Giha's ignorance of the provisions of life—the "lines"—proves fatal.

If he makes life yield to his own *extensive* sense of order, it's with too little regard for the prevailing intensive order, which is based on compartmentalization and specialization and autocratically brooks no bending of rules or crossing of lines. At one point, as Giha watches a man playing the piano alone on stage, there is a sense of a mysterious gulf between the two, the soloist

and the harmonist, and it's Giha who's the odd man out. The last shot in the film is an extended, subjective insert of a watch mechanism, as the watchmaker focusses on it and starts it running again. The film ends inside the specialist's lens. We don't see any lines here but, by a sort of mental superimposition—camera viewfinder/traffic markers/lens—we know they're there, and we know why—after Giha's death—the mechanism is running smoothly again: order has been restored, the challenge to it eliminated. A quiet masterpiece, *A Singing Blackbird* poses the deceptively unassuming question, "Must one commit oneself?" There's so much to life that to dwell on a part of it is to miss the rest.

A Note on Ioseliani's Latest Film, PASTORALE

The determination to convey Georgian life in the most truthful manner possible is indicated with cinematic understatement, perhaps a gentler instructiveness, in *Pastorale*. Ioseliani has placed the story among farmers in a remote area of the countryside, who speak a dialect almost incomprehensible to the average Georgian. *Pastorale* is very much a visual tone-poem. The introductory sequences concern a bored business executive in Tbilisi, interviewing his clients and eating a solitary luncheon from a tray in his office. Suddenly, one is transferred to the country village, where a quintet of young musicians arrives to spend a brief period of practice and relaxation. They are contemporary, a bit world-weary, but as unprepared in their own way for the humdrum routine and naive realities of their bucolic surroundings. Ioseliani's sharp perceptions are constantly aimed toward sardonic juxtapositions, in the subtlest sense, to establish those wistful ironies of human behavior that exist when cultural patterns coexist behind invisible barriers. The unspoken condescension of the three girls and two boys from Tbilisi toward those around them is tempered with a resigned, polite tolerance. On the other hand, the villagers evoke the most tremendous emotional sympathy from the spectator. Like the

people in Rouquier's *Farrébeque* or Dovzhenko's *Earth*, they are timeless embodiments of all humanity, and a mingled sadness and regret is felt mostly because they can never know, fully, the remnants of whatever civilization lies over the hills beyond.

The village is not at all cozy-cute, but unflinchingly grubby; the mud, poverty, insouciant pigs, goats and chickens, plus the eternal outhouse, are just *there*—the labor, too, for the women do everything without modern conveniences: without kitchens, they cook outdoors, plucking hens, broiling meat and fish on skewers, with the children standing about, waving smoke from the kettles. An old woman waters each grapevine from a single container, and groups of farmers rhythmically thresh wheat in the open fields. There is no entertainment. The men drink outside a cafe, engaging in minor shouting matches. Trains pass in the distance, and occasionally, a tourist bus will be held up by a cart on the road, just long enough for a young peasant girl to stop kneading dough and exchange a long glance with a mustachioed male passenger (Ioseliani himself).

When the sounds of classical music are heard, as the quintet rehearses, the villagers, especially the children, look upward toward the windows in pleased wonder; another world opening within their consciousness. Asya, the young maidservant, in her first contact with outsiders, is shyly innocent and on the brink of life. She is attracted to the cellist, but totally restrained, confining her admiration to peeks and humble politeness. Gradually, the musicians begin to appreciate the villagers, and tape recordings of folk songs and music. Ioseliani's mild social criticisms are amusing: an old man who apparently has made his living by gathering leftover hay is admonished by a caretaker-on-horseback who also takes away the man's scythe. Later, the man is seen gathering more hay with a *smaller* scythe. As two "fishermen" detonate small bombs in a creek and scoop up the stunned fish, the caretaker arrives to arrest them, only to discover that the landowner has sent them to catch the fish.

When the musicians leave, Asya is left with a recording of marching-band music as a memento; the village is left in its eternal atmosphere of work, silence, and Nature, and Ioseliani returns us to his Tbilisi businessman-at-home. His white-haired

Otar
Ioseliani
(standing,
right)
during the
shooting of
PASTORALE



mother and his wife, both docile, knit away in city comfort. The young daughter turns out to be one of the musicians and she brings back some apples from the village. Her father sits quietly

and munches one of them; from the faraway farms and flowering cherry trees, it is his only link with the ancient, the *real* Georgia.

—ALBERT JOHNSON

BILL NICHOLS

Fred Wiseman's Documentaries: Theory and Structure

The history of thought is the history of its models.

—Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language*

The final film is a theory about the event, about the subject in the film.

—Frederick Wiseman, interview

A problem plagues me. Namely this: modern film theory examines films as systems of signs whose significance derives primarily from internal relationships and not from external reference to another realm or system (usually taken to be "reality"). Traditional film theory has assumed a certain transparency between sign (image) and referent (reality). Eisenstein sought to transcend

it, Bazin to celebrate it. And even today this assumption remains most powerful in documentary film study, an area to which modern theory has given scant attention. What happens, however, if we refuse to trust the image's transparency, if we refuse to take on faith this apparent re-presentation of reality itself? What happens if we hypothesize that this transparency is an effect produced by work in and upon a system of signs and codes, that it is the site of formal and ideological strategies of considerable significance in their own right? This article seeks to answer these questions in relation to the documentary films of Frederick Wiseman.

Wiseman's films form a distinctive grouping in that they are virtually all studies of tax-sup-